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INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
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RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 4187
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 1999
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 1864
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 2435
RHMFIUU/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: EARTHQUAKE RUMOR SHOWS DANGER OF
LIMITING ACCESS TO INFORMATION

11. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

12. (SBU) SUMMARY: The calm of the dead of night in Ashgabat was disturbed by residents flocking out to the streets and driving off to their country dachas in response to a rumor that an earthquake was imminent. This rumor turned out to have absolutely no basis in fact, and it is difficult to understand how it started. Nevertheless, it perfectly illustrates the problems caused when there is limited access to information and no free press. In the absence of access to credible sources for local information, Turkmen rely on friends, neighbors, Russian TV, and rumint -- none of which is 100% reliable. END SUMMARY.

EARTHQUAKE'S A COMING

13. (SBU) The evening of August 19-20, a rumor spread like wildfire that an earthquake was imminent, setting off a city-wide panic in Ashgabat. Around 1:00am August 19, RSO received a call from the local guard force commander, who said that he had heard from a friend, who claimed someone had told him, that Turkmen television had broadcast news that there would be an earthquake within an hour. The local guard force commander added that when he looked outside, the street was filled with people and their belongings. The mobile patrol also called RSO to say that people were filing out of their buildings in various sections of the city. RSO initiated the cascade to alert American employees, and through CONS, local AmCits.

14. (SBU) Although the response by locals varied by neighborhood, panic often ensued. One Emboff left the elite apartment building where he lived to find his Turkmen neighbors fleeing in cars, saying that "Moscow" (Russian TV) had said an earthquake was coming. Some local employees informed their employers that they were going to their dachas out of town. Many Turkmen filed out into the streets based on what they had heard from a friend, neighbor or relative. One embassy night guard said that his family had called him to warn about the earthquake. Another FSN employee said that his sister-in-law, who works nights in a hospital, called his family. The "source" was variously, Turkmen TV, Russian TV or the Internet. Several people told us that the news had

said there had been an earthquake in China or Iran, which was the harbinger of one in Turkmenistan. (NOTE: The only sizable seismic activity near Turkmenistan took place on the China-Myanmar border at 2:35am Turkmenistan time -- long after the rumor started. One FSN first heard about an impending earthquake at 10:00pm on August 19. END NOTE.) One story told of soldiers knocking on doors, telling people to leave. One rumor said that an Ashgabat-to-Turkmenabat train had been stopped by officials because of the impending earthquake, and passengers were made to disembark. Following the threads back, it turned out that a passenger told her daughter that the train was delayed two hours because it had stopped in the night.

15. (SBU) While most people told of hearing about the earthquake from someone who heard of someone who supposedly heard it on TV, there was one account of possibly official involvement in contacting people about the impending earthquake. The neighbor of one FSN told her that she had been awakened by the loudspeaker blaring from a car with official government plates. The loudspeaker announced that people should get out of their homes at once.

NEVERMIND

16. (SBU) Although one group of residents insisted that the earthquake warning was on until 5:00am, by 2:30-3:00am, the police were taking steps to turn the rumor off. Police cars went through several neighborhoods with loudspeakers announcing that everything was fine and people should go home. The police told Embassy TDYers, who were standing

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outside of their hotel, that they should go back in. One group of residents supposedly called the presidential apparat, who confirmed there was no impending earthquake. The mother of one FSN called a hospital, and hospital staff informed her that the rumor was not true.

17. (SBU) COMMENT: The speed and intensity of this rumor highlights the power of rumors in a country where there is restricted access to information and no freedom of the press. As there are no credible local sources of information, people rely heavily on "Moscow" or rumint. And like many unsubstantiated rumors, this one took on a life of its own that was not hampered by the contraindicators. Yes, Turkmenistan is in a seismic zone, has had devastating earthquakes in the past, and is due for one in the future. Nevertheless, probably no place on earth has the ability to predict an earthquake within an hour or even a day. Furthermore, animals, which are often the first to react when there is an impending natural disaster, were calm, cool, and collected. If the government would like to avoid the problems and disruption caused by people reacting to wild-eyed rumors, it would be wise to stand up the proposed agency dealing with emergency situations and promote increased access to information. END COMMENT.
CURRAN